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The Scandalous God & Christology at the Crossroads

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Book Reviews

The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross

Vitor Westhelle

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006

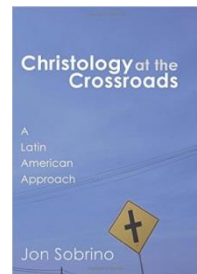
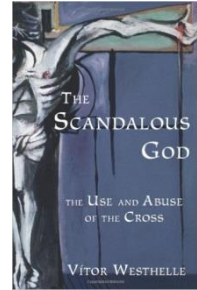
Christology at the Crossroads

Jon Sobrino, S.J., trans. by John Drury,

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984, 6th. ed.

As someone who possesses little fondness for the voluminous meanderings of systematic theologians, it might seem strange for me to offer a compare-contrast review of the two volumes listed above. As someone who has sustained both a love and fascination for Christology as it emerged from the New Testament writings I have been searching for New Testament scholars' efforts to produce a compelling Christology that either replaces or provides an update of the classic study by Reginald Fuller entitled The Foundations of New Testament Christology (1965). In my own academic meanderings I began my graduate work in Biblical studies (New Testament) but soon moved into the field of Modern European History. In my full-time academic career, entirely as a church historian at our own Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, I had some opportunity to teach this or that course in New Testament studies. Hence my inclinations, perhaps prejudices, lie in these two fields rather than the highly philosophical *tendances* of Systematic Theology. Hence I beg in advance the forgiveness of the reader should s/he tilt toward that theology of which I am not so inclined. Hopefully, by now I have covered my posterior enough to get into the meat of the above two volumes.

Certainly both books represent solid scholarship, and both deserve serious attention, especially among those who represent both the academy and the commitment to living by and with a "theology of the cross." Add to this the reality that both scholars have lived and taught in the cruciform cauldron of Latin America gives them a credibility that proves so sadly lacking among us more comfortable academicians in Canada and the United States. In both cases I found myself tiring over the standard European tracing of the theologies/philosophies surrounding western European and North American evolution of thought on the theme under discussion. I found myself utterly wearied over massive detail about the decline of Christendom with the Enlightenment and subsequent philosophies, you know Kant, Hegel, etc. *ad nauseum*. Even mention and discussion of my favorite modern Lutheran Karl Marx did not help much in alleviating the tedium of the two studies. I kept remembering (especially when reading Sobrino) my discovery in graduate school of Jürgen Moltmann's classical Theology of Hope and my "hope" that the "bloody" book would get off the likes of Kant, Hegel, Dilthey, Nietzsche and Marx and get to the real point, namely the last chapter where finally, yes FINALLY, he got to a vigorous theology of hope. Sadly I found this same tedium in Sobrino's thorough study. Westhelle had less of this mind-numbing characteristic but chiefly because the work was quantitatively only about one-third as long. For the reader inclined to applaud this history and evolution of philosophical



dogmatization then grab the Sobrino book up and gobble it down. It's unabashedly brilliant, and unlike so many other European-trained theologians, Sobrino integrates the vital Latin American input—read liberation theology.

Although I am inclined to praise both the accessibility of the Westhelle work to a broader audience from the intellectually oriented lay person to students within the academy, both undergraduate and graduate, I favor, given my own conscious faith journey of sixty year, the Sobrino study because of the very furnace out of which it grew and grows. In fairness to Westhelle, his study remains true to both his Lutheran heritage and his North American locus, namely his tilt toward Luther's brief 'dalliance' with a theology of the cross and his commitment to a re-mythologizing of it in light of both Lutheran theology and twentieth-century scholars as Paul Tillich who gave much of his energy to debating post-Enlightenment reason. Even when Westhelle gives keen attention to the importance of liberation theology, with a nod toward black theology, he shifts quickly from its more threatening mode to conceptual analysis and appeals to the poetic. In short, fair or not, I feel Westhelle slips away into a zone of safety by invoking a concept of a scandalous cross shorn of dangerous discipleship.

Hence I opt personally for Sobrino's cruciform Christology of discipleship, tedious as I found it via its voluminous and repetitive commentary. Though a loyal Jesuit to orthodox Roman Catholic Christology (Nicea and Chalcedon) he re-interprets it in such a way as to render it both radical and fluid. For him the model of Christology becomes the historical Jesus who struggles with his own sense of radical mission for God's reign over against the imperial and religious powers that seek and gain his execution, indeed that very Jesus who insists that true cruciform "Christology" must be immersed in dangerous discipleship. By way of example let me quote from the concluding chapter: "Christian faith is the acceptance of a God who really is greater, whose approach is a saving grace and a promise that was manifested in the resurrection. However, this faith must also maintain the scandal of God's silence on the cross.... t(T)his faith is jeopardized by all the crosses of history that seem to manifest the silence of God. It is constantly confronted with the groanings of history: of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, of Jesus dying on the cross, of all creation trying to come to birth and awaiting its liberation. Faith in God goes far beyond conventional theism and atheism. It takes its stand where things are happening, where the groaning of history can be heard and touched.... Christian hope believes in a utopia (a 'no place') whose 'place' is the resurrection and whose 'no place' is the cross (p. 393)."

How could I not prefer Sobrino's work, for it stands manifest in all his work and witness? How could I not find in him a model for cruciform theology in both thought and deed? He remains a living witness to this very day because he was at a conference in London, England on the very day when his Jesuit colleagues and two women workers became murdered martyrs in El Salvador (1989). How could such a one not bear the "stigmata of survival" while comrades bore the cross in such a literal and bloody fashion? So, dear Dr. Sobrino, help me to honor you and the crucified one you follow. As you put it so well, give me the courage and will to do the same: "Like Jesus, we must travel the road of service and self-surrender to the end. And because of Jesus, we can die with hopes of resurrection, with hopes of a new heaven and a new earth (p. 394)."

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